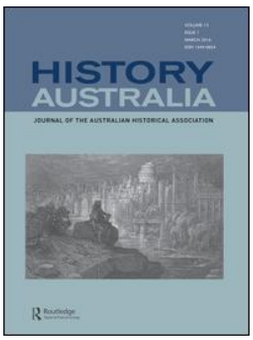

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The Australian gorilla revisited A reply to Claire Brennan

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Book Reviews

The Australian gorilla revisited

A reply to Claire Brennan

Graham Joyner

Claire Brennan's review of Graham Joyner's book *Monster, Myth or Lost Marsupial? The Search for the Australian Gorilla in the Jungles of History, Science and Language* (Canberra: Hayes UK & Thomas, 2009), appeared in *History Australia*. The author examines the historical, anthropological and linguistic evidence for the former existence of an unknown marsupial known as the Australian gorilla (or yahoo) while identifying systematic flaws in scientific thinking about zoological discovery. Brennan's review is disappointing. She shows no interest in philosophical issues, provides little insight into the other problems discussed and makes a number of errors.

In 2012 my book on the yahoo (or Australian gorilla) was reviewed in *History Australia* by Claire Brennan, an historian from James Cook University.[1] The book attempts to provide a comprehensive account of this little-understood phenomenon but also poses some questions about the nature and history of science, notably zoology. How, for example, do we respond to the new and unexpected? What happened when Europeans in Australia saw unfamiliar animals for the first time? How can we know that a particular creature once existed? And have difficulties with these

[1] Graham Joyner, *Monster, Myth or Lost Marsupial? The Search for the Australian Gorilla in the Jungles of History, Science and Language* (Canberra: Hayes UK & Thomas, 2009). The review ('Can't tell a yahoo from a yowie?') appeared in *History Australia* 9, no. 2 (2012), 229–31. Page numbers in this article refer to the book, not the review.

and other issues led scientists into error, so that the present matter is as much misunderstood today as it was 100 years ago?

Ideas are easily misconstrued. Among the better known and more immediate philosophical issues to have beguiled or baffled scientists is that perennial stumbling block, Ockham's razor. This is the suggestion that we should avoid all unnecessary assumptions. But when reduced – as it often is – to the idea that the simplest theory is best, Ockham's razor can be and has been used to explain away unwanted data, including records of zoological anomalies. And there are many such hazards. Even the apparently harmless (but false) assumption that if something is there to be found scientists will eventually find it can be put to the same purpose, as can misuse of the twin concepts of verification and falsification. Confusion has also arisen from the failure to understand the way the mind reacts to novelty. Wherever such faults occur, the history of science is potentially distorted or diminished.

All these irregularities and more are discussed in the book, which is essentially an inquiry into the assumptions underpinning zoological discovery with the spotlight on scientific reactions to a poorly defined animal (the yahoo) that was never actually discovered at all. Apart from drawing attention to the narrowness and inflexibility of some scientific thinking, the book provides a critical examination of the historical, anthropological and linguistic evidence for the former existence of the supposed animal.

Brennan's review, while it addresses several aspects of the matter, is disappointing. She shows no interest in philosophical issues (although these are central to the book) and provides little insight into the other problems discussed. At the same time her review is misleading in many ways, both as to fact and interpretation. The most important of these failings are discussed in the following paragraphs.[2] To make matters worse, Brennan claims to find disgust, bitterness and frustration where

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2 A few minor errors must also be mentioned. First, Brennan claims that I examine scientific reaction to the yahoo rather than the context of the reports or the supporting evidence. In fact I do both. For example, I give an account of the reaction by the geologist Edgeworth David to the casts in 1912 but also provide the historical background to the episode and discuss the casts themselves. Next, she asserts that the gorilla was discovered by western science in the 1860s. As I explain (22), the gorilla became well known to the west in the 1860s. However, the first scientific description of the animal was by Savage and Wyman in 1847. Thirdly, she claims that I trace enthusiasm for Bigfoot to a book published in 1972. I do nothing of the sort. I merely make the point (7) that a book by the British scientist John Napier published in that year about Bigfoot and other similar entities was instrumental in the emergence of the yowie. And how (as she claims) could enthusiasm for Bigfoot possibly have changed the nature and frequency of reports about the yahoo, when these reports belong to the nineteenth century and Bigfoot to the twentieth?

there is only gentle humour, something I direct at mistakes (including my own) rather than those who make them.

To begin with, Brennan asserts that I have spent decades struggling to have the existence of such a creature recognised as scientific fact. (Such a quest might explain the imagined bitterness and frustration, if not the disgust.) I am not sure how she arrives at this conclusion, or that such action would make much sense, but in any case the suggestion is not true. Instead my struggle – if that be the word – is with conventional ideas and the errors they generate. Orthodoxy, because it takes the middle ground, is always suspect, often wrong. Among other things, I try to show (15–20) that the accepted structure of zoological discovery, which demands a body as so-called proof, is unsatisfactory and needs to take into account evidence, in the form of records of confirmed sightings, provided by observers in the field.[3] As matters stand, the demand for proof (with all the certainty that term implies) in the form of a body (subject as it is to loss or destruction) presents a contradiction. At the same time the *absence* of a body not only consigns field sightings to irrelevance but discourages any mention of the supposed creature. Not surprisingly the current model, together with the belief that the creature (mistakenly seen as a primate) *could not* have existed in Australia, has elicited silence about the yahoo from scientists, interrupted only by efforts to explain it away, for well over a century. It is with this unwarranted rejection that I am concerned.

Secondly, Brennan finds my treatment of the Aboriginal term *dulugal* less than convincing. In what way, I wonder? The word *dulugal* occurs in several languages once spoken in south-eastern Australia, including Dharawal and Dhurga from the South Coast of New South Wales. Anthropologists and linguists have interpreted *dulugal* in various ways, but it has been used by the Aborigines themselves to describe the creature known to Europeans as the gorilla. My earlier account of this word (and the use in Australia of the word 'yahoo') was called 'definitive' by a former editor of the *Australian National Dictionary*.[4] The present version builds on that account and includes every relevant piece of data together with a detailed examination of attempts at interpretation. The result shows that *dulugal* has never been properly understood, even by linguists. Much the same goes for 'yahoo'.

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3 The demand for a body has no justification in theory. Whether we possess a specimen or merely observe the animal from a distance, we are presented with essentially the same opportunities and the same uncertainties. Obviously the former situation makes it far easier to confirm its existence and to describe certain (but not all) features.

4 W. S. Ramson to G. Joyner, 6 April 1994, in the author's possession. The paper referred to was 'The meaning of *yahoo* and *dulugal*: European and aboriginal perspectives of the so-called "Australian gorilla"', *Canberra Historical Journal* 33 (1994): 27–34.

Next Brennan makes a series of suggestions, each of which is debatable, about the links between the yahoo and the infamous yowie. The first (a) is that I do not explain my repeated assertion that the yahoo and the yowie are often mistakenly assumed to be one and the same. To start with, there are two different *concepts* here (as I shall explain shortly) and they are indeed commonly mixed up so as to appear as one. To show this I give a number of examples of the practice (11–14 and 23). She then complains (b) that 'the relationship between these creatures is never revealed'. Perhaps so, but for the good reason that such disclosure would not be possible – there are (so the evidence suggests) not two *creatures* involved but only one (the yahoo). However, I certainly do reveal the essential difference between the yahoo and the yowie. As I explain in the book (5–9), the yahoo was an unidentified marsupial occasionally sighted in the nineteenth century but presumably extinct by the early twentieth. On the other hand, the word 'yowie' is a late and regional variant of 'yahoo', one which in the mid-1970s was dragged from obscurity and attached to the image of an enormous primate borrowed from exotic forms like the yeti or the American Bigfoot. This unlikely combination was then applied retrospectively to certain garbled reports of the yahoo to produce the popular concept of the yowie. I show that there is some substance to the former, although nowhere do I demand what Brennan calls 'incontrovertible proof' (an inappropriate expression in this context) while claims for the existence of the latter have little credibility. She concludes (c) that in any case I believe the yahoo has 'a physical existence' while the yowie is 'a mythical beast', but even this is misleading. I suggest only that there is *some* evidence for the yahoo's *former* existence, while the yowie is best described as chimerical rather than mythical.

Brennan also claims that I dismiss secondary source material about the bunyip, the yowie, the yahoo, the hairy man or the moa in the context of folklore or colonial unease. This might give the impression that I reject key secondary material out of hand, but the truth is very much otherwise. To start with, there is little if any secondary material that attempts to deal with the yahoo in the context of folklore or colonial unease. Indeed the primary sources, which describe an actual creature, do not lend themselves to that interpretation. In reality secondary sources of a discordant nature about the yahoo are largely attempts to explain the creature away as something else, to suggest that, on zoogeographical grounds, the creature could not have existed in Australia or – in one case – to write the matter off in a manner that is both

simplistic and indicative of poor research. As shown in the book, none of this is convincing and most of it is eminently dismissible.[5] Perhaps it is this work that Brennan has in mind. On the other hand, there is a considerable amount of background material cited in the book of a linguistic, historical, philosophical or anthropological nature, including material that permits comparison of the yahoo with other animals (for example the tiger and the rhinoceros). Yet Brennan does not discuss my treatment of this work.

Finally, Brennan laments that the primary sources are not made accessible to readers. On the contrary, as I explain in the book (10), every item of historical significance then identified (including nearly all the most important documents) was collected and published as long ago as 1977. This was done precisely so that those interested in the matter could read the documents or use them as a basis for research. Copies of several other documents have since been placed in the National Library of Australia.[6] Yet more relevant material can be found (15) in a collection at the archives of the Australian Museum.[7] I cannot think of any significant document that is not now published or otherwise readily available. It would have been an expensive and unnecessary exercise to have published these as an appendix to the book. Overall Brennan does little more than raise questionable objections while repeating the sort of criticism which scientists unfamiliar with the matter routinely advance and to which the book provides a detailed rebuttal. It might have benefitted her readers (and students of the history of ideas generally) if, instead of merely adopting an orthodox approach, she had been able to discuss adequately the many issues dealt with in the book.

On another note entirely, readers may like to know that the book was reissued in October 2012 with a postscript that looks at misunderstandings that have arisen, plus developments that have taken place, since the book first appeared. The latter include excavations at Braidwood by scientists from both the Australian National University

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5 Material that falls into this category includes comments by Ralph Molnar (11–12), Colin Groves (12–13 and 101–108), Gregory Forth (14) and Malcolm Smith (109–112), although both Molnar and Groves also make positive contributions and the latter has an important part in the modern debate on the matter. The final work referred to is that by Robert Holden and Nicholas Holden (21 and 55–56).

6 See Graham C. Joyner, *The Hairy Man of South Eastern Australia* (Canberra: the author, 1977). There are other documents in my unpublished paper 'More historical evidence for the yahoo, hairy man, wild man or Australian "gorilla"', 1980, MS 3889, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

7 See G. C. Joyner, 'H J McCooey, the Australian Museum and the "Indigenous Ape"', 1986, AMS147, Australian Museum, Sydney.

and Flinders University, the aim being to find remains of an animal buried there in 1893. Also discussed are developments in neuroscience that confirm our capacity to interpret novelty in terms of images already present in the mind. Such a process is crucial to understanding the matter under discussion and explains much of the linguistic (and zoological) confusion. Copies of the revised book might be obtained from the Co-op Bookshop or direct from the publisher at GPO Box 3020, Canberra ACT 2600.

Review of a review of a review of a book

Claire Brennan

James Cook University

Nothing in Mr Joyner's response leads me to revise the views I expressed in the original review.

Mr Joyner claims I do not engage with his 'philosophical' arguments about the classification of species. I engaged with that section of the book as kindly as I could. The book does not discuss the place of the type specimen in scientific classification, and wishes the Yahoo to be accepted by science while not fulfilling that requirement. I think the quality of Mr Joyner's explanations in his rejoinder—particularly of whether the Yahoo and Yowie are one and the same—give sufficient flavour of the quality of argument in his book.

Mr Joyner wonders why I found the book's discussion of the term '*dulugal*' unconvincing. Perhaps his collection of every printed reference to the word is 'definitive', as he claims. Beyond that the book accuses anthropologists and linguists of misinterpreting Aboriginal informants when discussing what that word signifies. The existence of a word is not evidence for the existence of an object, and the ability to reinterpret use of a term to indicate the existence of a physical creature is not an argument for its recognition by science.

Mr Joyner suggests I confuse gentle humour with bitterness and frustration. I still fail to perceive a gentle sense of humour at work in his book. Humour is equally difficult to perceive in his excessively wordy rebuttal.

Loss and recovery

David Walker's work on Asian influences in Australian history

Greg Lockhart

In March 2013 distinguished historian David Walker of Deakin University took up an appointment as the inaugural BHP Billiton Chair of Australian Studies at Peking University. The creation of this post emphasises the central role Chinese economic engagement has played in the creation of Australian prosperity since the mid-1990s. Recently however, a slowdown in the Chinese economy is having a direct impact on Australian markets, one that demands ever-increasing competence in Australian handling of the bilateral relationship. Over four months into his appointment, Walker affirms in correspondence with the author that the Australian Studies Centre at Peking University has a key role to play in that relationship by building awareness of Australia among China's best and brightest.

He notes also that his students are very bright indeed; that they handle the complex themes of Australian identity, representation and geo-political insecurities with considerable assurance. In relation to places for Chinese students in Australia itself, he says we have a reputation for being more interested in money than in quality education and research excellence; that Australian universities are seen to grasp at rich Chinese fee-paying students rather than gifted ones. Whatever might be done about that perception, it is all the more reason why Australia should put its best foot forward at China's leading university. Given Walker's appointment to the Peking University post, the most important in Australian Studies outside the country (and arguably as important as any within it), some commentary on his understanding of the way neighbouring peoples and cultures have shaped Australian history is warranted.

He has recently published with talented young Monash University scholar Agnieszka Sobocinska their co-edited collection of essays *Australia's Asia: From Yellow Peril to Asian Century* (UWA Publishing, 2012). Sobocinska, who has travelled in Asia since before her undergraduate years, says her professional interest was, and still is, fuelled by the 'strange absence of Asia as a serious area of interest in Australia'. When she began her history PhD in 2005 on how travel experiences have influenced

popular vernacular and official diplomacy towards Asia from World War II, she was 'shocked' by the lack of work on Australian involvements in Asia. She would add that transnational approaches and young scholars with language skills do seem to offer cautious hope for change. Yet the opportunity she took to work with Walker on *Australia's Asia* suggests how unusual his focus still is among Australian historians.

Since I wrote one of the essays in the collection, I am precluded from reviewing it. But I am well positioned to say that a special feature of *Australia's Asia* chimes with its aspiration. The book includes for the first time essays by a range of Indian, Chinese, Indonesian, American and Danish as well as Australian authors on Australian history. The aspiration, which I shared with Walker, Sobocinska and the others, was to detail the variety of concrete historical relations with the countries to our north. These relations, far from being unprecedented as many are saying, are perennial because they are built into Australia's geographical proximity to Asia. *Australia's Asia* assumes that Australia's geographical location, which is generally obscured in the narrative of Australian history, is fundamental to what it means to be Australian.

Walker initiated *Australia's Asia* in an attempt to break the silences that settled around his major 1999 study *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939* (University of Queensland Press). With this publication we finally had a trail-blazing account of the extensive influence that the emergence of modern India, China and Japan had on the formation of the self-awareness of the Australian nation. The chapter on the invasion novels of the Federation-era notes pointedly that 'Asia' began its career as 'a versatile nightmare' that pushed 'a sleeping people towards nationhood'. The book promptly won the Ernest Scott Prize for History. But the history profession did not sustain its interest. Typically, the post-2000 publications of military historians including Craig Wilcox and John Connor on the pre-1914 period ignore *Anxious Nation* and still fail to realise how that nation's unwarranted insecurities do much to explain the construction of the imperial one they continue to privilege; the one that took shape in 1901 within the protective ambit of the British Empire. In the state of the art volume of essays *Australia's Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2007) edited by Deryck M. Schreuder and Stuart Ward, Ward was the only author to make even a perfunctory reference to Walker's work. Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line* (Melbourne University Press, 2008), which seeks to relate Australia and Asia in transnational terms, offers no discussion of Walker's work. Such complacency about the intimate impact that peoples to the north have

had in our history is framed by an arresting fact: *Anxious Nation* has long been out of print in Australia, but it is available in Indian and Chinese editions and has been translated into Hindi.

The overall response to *Anxious Nation* – the prize followed by local amnesia and such remotely configured fame – is culturally determined. It demonstrates a pattern of perennial Australian apathy about nearby nations that is periodically broken by startled discoveries of them. This explains the prize: by breaking silences about Asian countries and peoples in the Australian nationalist discourse, *Anxious Nation* recovered an important facet of the past, which fascinated historians at first sight, but then lost its attraction as the degree of disturbance involved in integrating it into the discourse dawned on them. In general, settler historians assume that the national identity has almost exclusively taken shape within the ambit of the British/American imperial orders. Regional geography and its influences are easier to forget. Silences that suppress a sense of Australia's place in the world tend to cohere tenaciously in the settler narrative of Australian history and, even, integrate it – but not its Indian and Chinese versions.

Walker was not always fully aware of what was at stake. His first book *Dream and Disillusion: A Search for Australian Cultural Identity* (Australian National University Press, 1976) explored the creative failures of writers including Vance Palmer and Louis Esson to build a national culture that could withstand the formidable disenchantments of the First World War. The book raised 'Asia' once or twice. But it conveyed little sense of how the region to the north might have related to the 'democratic community' and identity those writers promoted. *Dream and Disillusion* passes over Palmer's concern about the menace of Japan and his trembling construction of such a hybrid character as that of the beautiful Eurasian girl in his 1924 novel *The Outpost*. There was no detailed account of Esson's somewhat mysterious trip to Japan in 1908. Walker did not yet say that their 'democratic community' was only for whites. Nevertheless, he was left with a nagging sense that 'Asia' had more to do with Australian constructions of national identity than he knew about. *Dream and Disillusion* led to *Anxious Nation*. A desire for further clarification has led to *Australia's Asia*. Most recently, we have David Walker, *Encountering Turbulence: Asia in the Australian Imaginary* (Readworthy Publications, 2013), which is a collection of his essays and book chapters published over the last decade.

What gives Walker's work its special focus and drive? To approach an answer to this question there is no avoiding *Not Dark Yet: A Personal*

History (2011), which Giramondo Press has recently reprinted. A Chinese translation will be published in March next year. The elegantly ironic title confirms both the personal crisis he experienced when macular degeneration severely impaired his sight in 2004 and his heroic decision to continue working as an historian after he was declared legally blind. His new task began with him rethinking the kind of history he was able to write. With special keyboards and larger fonts, history written in 'a more personal voice' seemed viable. Historian Tom Griffiths has summed up the outcome well: 'a serious meditation on the idiosyncrasies of sight, memory and family legend, this remarkable book offers a portrait of twentieth century Australia that is both profoundly moving and very funny'.[8] I would add that the work is driven by Walker's determination to recover from irreparable loss.

His 2004 crisis was not entirely unheralded either in his life or work: 'Even before,' he has told me, 'sight was an issue'. Apart from reporting that a Canberra specialist had much earlier diagnosed 'extreme short-sightedness', the primacy *Not Dark Yet* gives to 'the world of books and readers' suggests how the memoir internalised that condition. The book opens with him reading: 'There I was reading Frederic Prokosch's *The Asiatics: A Novel*' when 'the line of print began to warp and bend'. Further details of his 'eye trouble' are briskly deferred while the story of how he acquired *The Asiatics* at a church fête is related and Prokosch's biography becomes the bridge to his own family history: 'Prokosch was an American writer, born in 1908, the same year as my father Gilbert Walker, commonly known as Gil. I doubt whether my father would have read *The Asiatics*'. Fully sighted in the world of books, Walker sets up a witty narrative that gently mocks as it manages self-doubt.

My speculation also is that both his short sight and his loss of sight have drawn him closer to what is in front of him than he would otherwise have been. Along with its light humorous touch, his writing is grounded in an unequivocal sense of an Australian here and now. There is a paragraph in *Not Dark Yet* where the 'untidy gum trees' reduce the familiar design of the old country to disarray. We are in his ancestral home town Burra, South Australia, where the 'town square still evokes old England in a dry, implacably Australian landscape'. Old England is not forgotten; nor need it be. But its function is to foreground Australian gum trees. Walker's tenaciously dry sensibility flattens things out; with no eye for

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8 Tom Griffiths, Address at book launch for *Not Dark Yet: A Personal History* February 2011, published at http://www.deakin.edu.au/research-services/news/2011/03/08/not-dark-yet---a-personal-history.

the remote affiliations of the Anglosphere, his writing expands a local perspective. Hence, I think, the independent way of seeing that informs all his books.

A way of seeing is neither a focus nor a drive. *Not Dark Yet* convinces me that Walker's need to manage the family silences surrounding the loss of his Uncle Laurie who was murdered by Japanese troops in the Laha massacres on Ambon in 1942 has largely fixed his historical focus. Given the way with words he inherited from his mother, that atrocity also drives his writing. His account of the massacre is detailed with remarkable balance, but its occurrence reverberates throughout his work. Loss is central to *Dream and Disillusion*, wherein the ideal of a national culture fails to match reality. *Anxious Nation* sought to recover that loss by reminding us of the inevitable imprint of Asian histories on Australian culture. With knowledge of Laurie's fate we have a better appreciation of why Walker's memoirs confide that 'books linking Australia and Asia … are my particular thing'. We more readily note the irony that both his memoirs and other works recover more gentle ways in which Japanese culture has shaded Australian history; the 'Japanese Fair', which the memoirs record in Burra in July 1914, for example. And we realise how his work has been sensitised to other family silences: his discovery, unspoken of in the family for at least a generation, that the father-in-law of one of his great uncles was a Chinese man named Luke Day. A melancholy irony of Walker's personal history is that it has motivated him to clarify the nature of a nation that has tended anxiously to deny its geographical setting and, to that extent, its identity.

There is much in *Australia's Asia* about 'crossing oceans and cultures'. My sense is that these crossings play on the main differences between two constructions of the nation: the imperial nation, which still rests on and maintains a denial of the geographical/Asian aspects of Australian identity; and the independent nation, which would in large measure rest on and promote an acceptance of those aspects. Whether the book is read with sustained interest remains to be seen. Recently, at the 2012 and 2013 Australian History Association conferences, there have been numerous papers on Australian-Asian connections and mobilities. Perhaps this suggests change. But it is too early to know whether or not we are dealing with yet another flash in the pan of Australian interest in the countries and peoples to its north. Much depends on whether Australian culture is yet adapting to the changing economic and strategic circumstances that are determining its future. One would like to think that David Walker's appointment to the post in Beijing is an encouraging sign.